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ABSTRACT

The Teachers Abroad Program (TAP) was developed as a project of the Mennonite Central Committee to meet the educational needs of developing nations. Its activities in Bolivia involve North American volunteer teachers committed to starting a school in a rural community in 2 years and, following this period, assisting the community in obtaining a government teacher to continue the program. TAP schools provide primary curriculum in reading, writing, arithmetic, science, and Bolivian history, all taught in Spanish. Community and parent involvement are encouraged. Since 1974, program priorities have included community development, nonformal adult education, inservice training for government teachers, and diversification to meet community and educational needs beyond the initial 2 years. A goal of these priorities is to improve Bolivia's national system of rural education, which is oriented toward preparing children to function in an agrarian setting and does little to prepare students for secondary or university education. Another TAP goal is to improve the sometimes inadequate teacher preparation in Bolivia. Future TAP goals involve the provision of educational opportunities, integration of school and community, meeting of short- and long-range educational needs, creative and dynamic instruction, and elimination of prejudice. (JD)

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TEACHERS ABROAD PROGRAM: A MODEL OF RURAL PRIMARY EDUCATION IN BOLIVIA

Harold D. Lehman, James Madison University

CIES Annual Meeting, March 19, 1982
New York, N. Y.

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Founding of the Teachers Abroad Program

The Teachers Abroad Program (TAP) developed as a project of the Mennonite Central Committee, a relief organization founded in 1920 to provide material assistance to the victims of war and natural disaster. During and after World War II the MCC distributed relief supplies in Europe, helped in the resettlement of refugees and other reconstruction programs. In recent years the organization has expanded basic maintenance and agricultural services to people in 40 countries.

As the decade of the '60s approached, the MCC's attention turned to the educational needs of African nations which were moving to independence after colonial rule. The program envisioned became known as the Teachers Abroad Program. Several basic principles underlaid the original TAP concept in Africa:

(1) TAP should work with and sustain the programs of church-related schools (denominational affiliation of such schools was not a restricting factor).

(2) TAP should reduce their programs and withdraw personnel as rapidly as national teachers were available.

(3) TAP should be financially self-sustaining for field costs (made possible by government subsidies to church schools for teachers' salaries).

(4) TAP personnel should be clustered in four or five areas rather than scattered thinly over the continent.

(5) North Americans with at least a bachelor's degree in an academic discipline major and with a minimum of one year's successful teaching experience should be recruited to serve on a support basis for a three-year period.

(6) Orientation should include a recommended reading list on Africa, a two-week orientation in North America, and a week in the country of their assignment.

The Teachers Abroad Program was launched in 1962 in five African nations. By 1981 at least 650 volunteers had served in primary schools, secondary schools, teacher training colleges and universities in fifteen countries in Sub-Sahara Africa. The number of TAP'ers (teachers) in Africa rose to 165 in 1970 and steadily decreased to 72 by 1980.

Among the problems faced by TAP in Africa was adjusting to the European-style educational systems, the irrelevance of school programs to the realities

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of rural life in Africa, the impossibility of TAP being self-supporting on the field, and the need to broaden priorities to rural development, adult education and vocational training.[1]

Development of TAP in Bolivia

In 1969 the Teachers Abroad Program was begun in Bolivia where MCC had been engaged in community development, agriculture and health programs for the previous decade. This work centered in the low-land areas east of Santa Cruz where there were scattered rural communities without schools available. Five teachers came under TAP during the first year. Since the early '70s the program has remained relatively stable with an average of fifteen teachers on the field. As schools became established it was necessary for TAP to move also into high-land communities west of Santa Curz within a radius of 75 miles.

The TAP plan in Bolivia was to promise a North American volunteer teacher in a non-school rural community for two years. In return the community was to build the teacher's home and the school building, usually a combined structure. The MCC assisted in the construction by providing the floor and roof (after 1973, roof only). Communities interested in a school made contact with MCC either directly or through the government educational offices, although in the early years MCC personnel would go out in search for communities. After the initial two-year operation of the school, TAP personnel would assist the community in obtaining a government teacher to continue the program.

This model was followed throughout the '70s and is still applicable today in a few communities. Recently it has became more difficult to find unschooled communities with a population large enough to receive a government teacher (a minimum of 25 students required). Of the 28 schools established by TAP all but two were able to obtain "government item" which provided support for Bolivian teachers after the volunteers' two-year term was completed.

Typically the TAP schools provided a primary curriculum in reading, writing, arithmetic, science and Bolivian history, all instruction being in Spanish. The teachers outside of the classroom worked with children in such activities as gardening, playing games and club work. In some communities efforts were made to organize parents and to provide club activities and literacy programs for adults. Some of the original schools, now under government support, have grown in size and in grade offerings where the local population is able to support such expansion.[2]

Each of the four directors in the history of TAP in Bolivia has brought a slightly different emphasis to the program. The first direcor who served until 1974 pushed the community development role of the volunteer teacher. The second director was interested in non-formal adult education but was not in the position long enough to get any serious programs going. The third director, 1976-79, initiated some in-service training programs for government teachers. The present co-directors are trying a more diversified approach to meet community and educational needs for periods beyond the initial two years.[3]

Bolivia's National System of Rural Education

As in many developing countries there is a great difference between urban and rural schools in Bolivia. Rural schools are oriented toward preparing the child to function in an agrarian setting. They provide for primary and vocational-technical training, but do little to prepare students for movement into secondary or university levels. Failure is common in rural schools. Only twenty percent of rural pupils in Bolivia enrolled in the first grade complete the five grades of the primary school. "One important factor in this low rural figure is the insistence that all instruction be in Spanish, although most pupils are monolingual Quechua- or Aymara-speakers."[4]

William Carter describes Bolivian rural schools as being "constructed with locally donated materials and labor with a minimum of dependence on state aid . . . . Libraries, laboratories and shops are practically nonexistent. Students lack opportunities to practice manual skills while in school and to preserve their literacy once they leave."

"The scarcity of teachers compounds the inadequacy of buildings and equipment. Teachers are very poorly paid. /At the beginning of the new school term, February 1982, teachers were demanding a 300% salary increase to cover a similar increase in cost of living since they last got a salary increase5/. . . . Merely to survive, teachers must often hold additional jobs; they can give only sporadic attention to their students, and their teaching is generally uninspired. They use an extreme form of rote instruction, dictating lessons for a child to copy into a notebook which is graded on the basis of neatness, accuracy and artistic quality. At the end of the term the pupil is expected to have memorized its contents and to feed them back in an oral final examination. This process gives the student very little preparation for the realities of life."[6]

Bolivia provides two types of three-year normal schools, each following the secondary school. One with higher entrance requirements is for urban teachers; the other type with less requirements is for rural teachers. In the cities almost all teachers are titled but in the rural areas nearly 50% of the teachers are not trained. Many of the older teachers do not even have a secondary education.

Present Teachers Abroad Program in Bolivia

In order to meet present conditions in the rural areas being served, TAP in Bolivia is giving priority to these policies:

(1) Not sticking to an arbitrary two-year involvement if the community will not be able to obtain a government teacher because of decreasing school population. This provides more flexibility in negotiations with communities served by TAP and is necessary because of shifting population patterns in the rural areas. For administrative purposes the MCC needs to keep its work centralized within an area of 30-100 miles north and west of Santa Cruz, its headquarters in Bolivia.

(2) Increasing the promotion of adult non-formal education. The strengthening of adult non-formal education tends to bring more stability into the total life of a rural community. TAP is cooperating with two adult literacy programs in progress in the area. Through community awareness sessions TAP is seeking to find out what the people see as their own needs and is trying to help parents to be more supportive of their children's education.

(3) Training promising young people to serve as auxiliary teachers. These persons assist until a school has enough children to receive a government teacher. As helpers they receive some reimbursement from the community and from MCC. This past summer (current winter season in the northern hemisphere) the TAP co-directors and several teachers taught a concentrated 4-weeks course for national Bolivians chosen to be auxiliary teachers. In the first week there was individual tutoring on the basics of reading and math. This was followed by demonstrations and discussions on how children learn. They considered alternative teaching methods to those experienced by the Bolivian young people in their own schooling. Through role playing and practice teaching the participants worked with teaching methods and materials for use in the rural classroom. A teaching manual was prepared for the pre-school level.

At the close of the course the TAP personnel reported positively on the potential and progress of the six auxiliary teachers who completed the course. It remains to be seen how well these auxiliary teachers will be able to cope with the classroom situation in the new school term. It is also uncertain whether the campesinos will be able to come up with the one dollar (equivalent) per month they need to contribute toward the salary of the auxiliary teachers.

Projections for Future Program

In the past year the TAP personnel in Bolivia evaluated the program and projected directions for the next few years. This self-study was reviewed by the writer of this paper on a consultative basis in June 1981. Together with TAP persons on the field we worked on the process of setting goals for the future.

The self-study began with the formulation of general and specific assumptions. As a sample, a few of the general statements are listed thus:

"(1) The Bolivia TAP program is carried out in a cultural setting foreign to the cultural background of the teachers.

(2) The program operates in rural Bolivian communities in which the medium of communication, Spanish, is not only a second language to the teacher but also to many parents and students in the respective communities.

(3) TAP teachers are volunteers serving as guests of the Bolivian people and as such will want to be ambassadors of love and goodwill.

(4) Some of the most significant learning takes place outside the formal classroom setting in nonformal types of activities.

(5) Long-range program goals can be evaluated effectively only after the learners become productive adults and not at the end of a one or two-year period."[8]

General objectives and specific behavioral outcomes were listed. The general objectives are stated as follows:

"(1) To provide educational opportunities for approximately 150 elementary school age children in five or six rural villages.

(2) To work towards an integration of school and community by promoting community planning, participation and responsibility.

(3) To pursue two approaches to meet the educational needs of the rural communities: by providing short-range services and by encouraging long-range community development.

(4) To use creative and dynamic methods and materials in the instructional program to facilitate the learning process and to serve as a laboratory for improvement of Bolivian instruction.

(5) To continue to use community and other MCC personnel-medical, agricultural, nutritional, manually skilled, etc. - to complement the basic educational program.

(6) To discourage attitudes and practices that tend toward prejudice, stereotyping, and exploitation by stressing social justice within the context of school and community.

(7) To remain flexible and open to change in programming so long as changes are in line with sound educational philosophy and objectives.

(8) To work within the general educational structure in cooperation with Bolivian educational leadership and colleagues.

(9) To utilize the efforts of other public and private agencies that are engaged in the improvement of rural education in Bolivia.

(10) To incorporate into the community educational program various types of nonformal educational activities."[9]

The third step was a Plan of Action outlining curricular experiences, innovative methodology, and roles of the teacher. Suggestions for the future of TAP involvement in Bolivia include setting up an educational materials center, providing inservice workshops for national teachers, continuing the training of auxiliary teachers for small communities, hiring Bolivian teachers at MCC expense, placing TAP teachers in Bolivian intermediate and secondary schools, providing a few TAP teachers with vocational or technical training for post-primary schools, and placing a resource person in a Bolivian teacher training college.

Need was expressed for an integrated TAP model, one which takes a more holistic approach to rural development and which involves all aspects of MCC's involvement in Bolivia. Further expansion of non-formal educational activities for adults is recommended, i.e. organizations for mothers and families, literacy programs, health care and first aid, pre- and post-natal care, nutrition and agriculture projects.

A personnel request was made to MCC for a person with expertise in setting up non-formal adult education programs and in training village leaders for such activities. Another request was for a person who can work with the Montero Regional Rural Education headquarters in developing and presenting inservice workshops for Bolivian teachers of grades 1-8. Such a person could also work in a supervisory role with national teachers.

In conclusion MCC-TAP is just one organization working for the improvement of life in rural Bolivia. Its establishment of over two dozen primary schools, now turned over to the local populace, has been a quantitative success. This meets an important criterion acceptable to the Bolivian rural school authorities.

On the other hand there are problems to consider especially in a qualitative evaluation of TAP in Bolivia. After the initial two years of a school it is difficult to turn over the program to relatively untrained national teachers. Often the government teacher who follows a TAP'er is himself an outsider to the community. There has been only a limited "multiplier effect" in terms of improving the traditional patterns in the national schools.

Education in rural Bolivian schools tends to provide opportunity for youth to leave their traditional village life and go off to the city. Fundamentally the question is: For what purposes does MCC-TAP provide educational opportunities for children in a relatively primitive agrarian society?

ENDNOTES

[1]Nancy Heisey, "Teachers Abroad Program in Sub-Sahara Africa," May 19, 1981, unpublished MCC report.

[2]"MCC: Three Major Programs," undated publicity folder concerning MCC/Bolivia.

[3]Personal letter from Ken Lehman, dated January 31, 1982.

[4]William Carter, Bolivia, a Profile (New York: Praeger, 1971), p. 143.

[5]Personal letter from Ken Lehman, dated February 28, 1982.

[6]William Carter, op. cit., pp. 145-6.

[7]Personal letters from Ken and Linda Lehman, dated February 18 and 19, 1982.

[8]"Teachers Abroad Program of MCC/Bolivia," November 13, 1981, unpublished MCC report, p. 1.

[9]Ibid., p. 2-3.